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### **Comment on 'To see ourselves as we need to see us: Ethnography's primitive turn in the early Cold War years' (Edwin N. Wilmsen)**

#### **Citation for published version:**

Barnard, A 2009, 'Comment on 'To see ourselves as we need to see us: Ethnography's primitive turn in the early Cold War years' (Edwin N. Wilmsen)', *Critical African Studies*, vol. 1, pp. 61-65.  
<<http://www.tandfonline.com/10.1080/20407211.2009.10530743>>

#### **Link:**

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

#### **Document Version:**

Peer reviewed version

#### **Published In:**

Critical African Studies

#### **Publisher Rights Statement:**

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<http://www.tandfonline.com/10.1080/20407211.2009.10530743>

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## **Commentary**

Alan Barnard

I agree with much that Wilmsen says. Indeed, I expressed very similar views not only in 'The lost world of Laurens van der Post?' (Barnard 1989), but also throughout *Anthropology and the Bushman* (Barnard 2007b, 53-81, 97-111, 129-47). However, I disagree with his implicit and simplistic categories of anthropologist as either *bad* (those who succumbed to the primitivist *Zeitgeist*) or *good* (those who remained immune to it). I also disagree with his simplification of the issues. The traditionalists do not reject historical understanding in favour of primitivism or building an us/them dichotomy just for the sake of it. They reject Wilmsen's interpretation of archaeological evidence and documentary sources on the impact of culture contact on San peoples. If they have strayed too far towards generalizing ethnography, Wilmsen strays too is his occasional misrepresentation of their intentions and seemingly deliberate misreading of their ill-chosen phrases.

## **The foraging mode of thought**

I shall return to those general issues at the end of this commentary, but let me explain first my own position in light of Wilmsen's specific criticisms of my notion of the foraging, hunter-gather or Mesolithic mode of thought. My choice of label has always depended on the audience and the imagery connoted, which differs greatly in the various countries in which I have discussed it: England, Wales, Norway, Japan, and Argentina. It also differs with

ethnographic, archaeological, and development studies audiences. The opposite of a *foraging* mode of thought is an *accumulation* mode of thought. The former is characterized, for example, by a preference towards immediate consumption which is associated with sharing, and the latter by accumulation associated with saving for one's dependents. These are idealized models. Real societies, and certainly real individuals, at best only approximate these representations, and these ideological transitions tend to lag behind changes in means of subsistence. My original full formulation of the models was for an audience consisting mainly of development practitioners and social scientists interested in development, including many from Botswana. What I set out to explain was not the nature of San society, but sets of structural inversions apparent in relative oppositions between what I loosely called 'accumulation' thinking (that of development experts) and 'foraging' thinking (that of many hunter-gatherers and mixed hunter-gatherer-herder-labourers). Similar, but by no means identical, ideas are apparent in the distinction James Woodburn (e.g. 1980) makes between immediate and delayed-return economies.

Wilmsen suggests that my notion of the foraging, hunter-gatherer or Mesolithic mode of thought is related to that of Lévy-Bruhl. On the contrary, the idea has nothing directly to do with Lévy-Bruhl, who in his writings expressed two quite different views of the relation between primitive and civilized thought. In most of his books Lévy-Bruhl (e.g. 1926 [1910]) held that 'primitive peoples' (and he sometimes uses inverted commas on this term himself) think logically most of the time and are just as capable as anyone else to solve practical problems by thinking through them. However, in his view, their failure to distinguish true representations from mystical or symbolic ones leads to an inability to think logically *in the abstract*. Equally, in his view, 'primitive thought' reflected collective rather than individual thinking, and differs in this regard from ideal 'civilized thought', and in particular the thought systems of literate peoples, which to Lévy-Bruhl tend allow for more individual variation.

Here he was simply following the spirit of his time and place, and in particular the ideas of Durkheim and Mauss (e.g. 1963 [1903]) on ‘collective representations’ – a phrase Lévy-Bruhl uses often in his writings. Lévy-Bruhl’s second theory of ‘primitive thought’ is that expressed in his posthumously-published notebooks. There he explicitly rejected his 1910 statement and substituted a more subtle understanding. In a notebook entry dated 29 August 1938 he remarks: ‘There is a mystical mentality which is more marked and more easily observable among “primitive peoples” than in our own societies, but it is present in every human mind’ (Lévy-Bruhl 1975 [1949], 101).

That said, I would nevertheless admit to a certain parallel in the *progression* of my ideas of the foraging mode of thought and Lévy-Bruhl’s on the primitive mentality. In the *Notebooks* Lévy-Bruhl comments:

If I glance over all I have written on the subject of participation between 1910 and 1938, the development of my ideas seems clear to me. I started by positing a primitive mentality different from ours, if not in its structure at least in its function, and I found myself in difficulties in explaining the relationships with the other mentality, not only among us but also among ‘primitive peoples’. In short, I had only juxtaposed them, without being able to account for either their coexistence or their relations. A position which I have never been able to defend well, and in the long run an untenable one. By limiting myself to discussing mental customs, I took refuge in withdrawal. But the thesis thus extenuated and weakened is no more defensible. One will then ask whence these customs arise, and how, in themselves, they constitute a ‘mentality’ which, in an inexplicable fashion, co-exists with the logical exercise of our mental activity. (Lévy-Bruhl 1975 [1949], 100)

While I do not see ‘mentality’ and ‘mode of thought’ as at all the same thing, and certainly do not equate the ‘primitive’ and the ‘foraging’, I can see where others might have problems with my terminology. Thomas Widlok (pers. comm.) once suggested I might better have described ‘mode of thought’ as ‘ideology’, and in recent work I have tended to favour that latter term, or to make plainer the fact that it is ideology (not mentality or mode of thought) which is at issue. I have also frequently used instead the phrase ‘foraging ethos’ (in contrast to ‘accumulation ethos’). The reason I used ‘mode of thought’ in the first place was to hint at yet another opposition, namely the notion of ‘mode of production’. I first pointed this out in 1993, towards the end of the Marxist era, when I said that we should turn away from production, towards thought, as the driving force of human culture (Barnard 1993, 34). Mode of production is not so much ‘means of production plus relations of production’, as in classic Marxist understandings, but the ideological, social and material, in that order, in interplay with each other. I still stand broadly by that view, although these words may still not be quite right to express the meaning.

Wilmsen cites favourably my paper on van der Post (Barnard 1989), but accuses me of switching sides in my work on modes of thought. This is not quite accurate. I never said that I was immune from van der Postianism. On the contrary, I admitted that the entire subdiscipline of Bushman or San studies is guilty of it. That includes me (see also Barnard 1996). I argued for a collective reflexivity, and I suggested that we might better understand the relation between the people we work with, the imagery we create, and ourselves, if we aim for this. My van der Post paper was, like Wilmsen’s one here, primarily about the exploration of imagery in ethnography. My later work on the foraging mode of thought was quite different. In that I sought to understand relations between two ideologies – the *articulation of modes of thought*, one might say. This is undoubtedly clearest in my first full

paper on the subject (Barnard 1998), and the rest might best be thought of as an extension of that model to other issues, including the Mesolithic-Neolithic transition.

In the paper most criticized I state explicitly that there I am concerned ‘not with direct ethnographic analogy, but rather with relational analogy’ (Barnard 2007a, 5). Further,

A relational analogy involves comparable archaeological periods, and it involves equivalent sets of structural relations. Comparable here means literally comparable; it does not mean identical (Barnard 2007a, 5).

Wilmsen cites a figure of mine (Barnard 2007a, 12, Fig. 5) as implying that in the Mesolithic mode of thought social equality is natural, and in the Neolithic and later, unnatural. This is not true. Admittedly, the chart if read by itself might seem to imply that, but the text of that article makes crystal clear that I am talking about how Mesolithic and Neolithic peoples construct the meaning of egalitarianism, not whether such a construction truly is either ‘natural’ or ‘unnatural’. Wilmsen’s comments on my reading of Enlightenment and Enlightenment-derived texts are, of course, also misplaced. In my Mesolithic paper I was not talking about Rousseauian ‘natural inequalities’, but about the social hierarchies Rousseau (1984 [1755], 68) called ‘artificial inequalities’. Like Rousseau, I argued that there was a clear transition between an egalitarian, hunter-gatherer way of thinking and an inegalitarian, post-hunter-gatherer one, with elements of hunter-gatherer thought persisting through the transition. Wilmsen therefore misrepresents my Kalahari comparisons and speculations on the (late) Northwest European Neolithic. Nor does his paper explain any of the subsistence-related ideological transitions I referred to (Barnard 2007a, 16-17): knowledge of the environment to knowledge of herding and cultivating skills, search for food to search for grazing (for herders) or spatial stability (for cultivators), chance of finding meat to guaranteed

supply of meat, sharing meat to trading meat, lots of free time to longer working hours, few possessions to chance to acquire more, fewer worries about water to more worries, taking each day as it comes to planning for the future, a relatively stable supply of food to greater fluctuation, and production primarily for one's own use to production for trade. Far from being anti-Enlightenment, oppositions similar to mine on subsistence ideology, egalitarianism, and so on, were common in a good deal of 18<sup>th</sup>-century texts on the nature of society and of economic systems, both in France and in Scotland (see Barnard 2004)

### **Where does this leave Wilmsen's argument?**

Many of Wilmsen's points are well made. However, his mocking misrepresentation of the views of others does no service to his extremely interesting and, to a degree, valid arguments. Wilmsen's statement (true or false) that 'the image [of the Bushman] feeds readily into racist discourse' does not in itself require it to be rendered obsolete. There are other, more effective, ways to combat racism than changing one's ethnography to suit others' misguided perceptions. No-one in San studies denies the power structures which have been present at the fringe of San societies for centuries. No-one denies the complex relations among ethnic groups. No-one denies that van der Post, Marshall, Lee, Bieseke or I construct images through our writing. I hope that Wilmsen does not deny that he does the same. It is in the nature of *ethnography* to do so. To abandon ethnography for a de-ethnicized historiography will not solve practical problems for San or anyone else. Nor will it purify anthropology. It will just turn it into something else.

What is required is a recognition of the problem, and a collective reflexivity from all of us on behalf of the discipline. Lévy-Bruhl had the humility to re-evaluate his own writings

in that way. I argued in ‘Laurens van der Post and the Kalahari debate’ (Barnard 1996, 243-47) that revisionist discourse, as well as traditionalist, is all about the construction of images. It is just that these are different images from those of the late 20th-century, traditionalist mainstream. Whereas traditionalists emphasize San egalitarianism, revisionists such as Wilmsen’s emphasize unequal relations between San and others. If fault is to be found in traditionalist discourse of the 1960s and 1970s, it is more with the leaving out of Herero, Tswana or Afrikaner presence (as if they occupy a different ecological niche), or simply with the now dated language of ‘primitive’, ‘Pleistocene’, ‘simple’, or ‘natural’ in reference to Bushmen or San. Yet both these problems were solved at least two and a half decades ago, as the various editions of *The Dobe !Kung* (e.g. Lee 1984, 119-45) make clear. Wilmsen is right to draw attention once again to such issues, but he is wrong to think that *any* of us, including Wilmsen himself, can fully escape from at least a degree of easily misread essentialism. Like it or not, essentialism remains the basis of any ethnographic generalization.

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